

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1 1. In a vehicle having a passenger compartment, an instrument
2 panel system comprising:

3 an instrument panel having an opening configured to receive one of
4 a plurality of devices, the device received to be accessible by an occupant in the
5 passenger compartment through the opening, wherein the opening has an area and
6 each of the plurality of devices has an area substantially equal to or less than the
7 area of the opening; and

8 a removably attachable secondary panel for covering a portion of the
9 opening when the device received has an area less than the area of the opening, the
10 secondary panel forming an intermediate surface visible to the occupant between the
11 instrument panel and at least a portion of the device.

1 2. The instrument panel system of claim 1 wherein the
2 intermediate surface substantially surrounds the device.

1 3. The instrument panel system of claim 2 wherein the secondary
2 panel includes an aperture through which the received device is accessible to the
3 occupant.

1 4. The instrument panel system of claim 2 wherein the received
2 device is a display for use in conveying information to the occupant.

1 5. The instrument panel system of claim 2 wherein the received
2 device is a control panel for use by the occupant to control at least one vehicle
3 system.

1 6. The instrument panel system of claim 1 wherein the surface
2 of the secondary panel visible to the occupant substantially matches the surface of
3 the instrument panel visible to the occupant.

1 7. The instrument panel system of claim 6 wherein the
2 instrument panel and secondary panel are configured to meet so that the instrument
3 panel and secondary panels appear substantially integral to the occupant.

1 8. The instrument panel system of claim 3 wherein the
2 instrument panel comprises a plurality of openings, each opening configured to
3 receive one of a plurality of devices, and wherein the secondary panel includes a
4 plurality of apertures through which the received devices are accessible to the
5 occupant.

1 9. The instrument panel system of claim 1 wherein the secondary
2 panel is removably attachable by the occupant, and the system further comprises at
3 least one additional secondary panel having a different appearance than the
4 secondary panel, such that the occupant can change the appearance of the instrument
5 panel system by replacing the secondary panel with the at least one additional
6 secondary panel.

1 10. The instrument panel of system claim 1 wherein the secondary
2 panel comprises an opaque portion and a transparent portion, the opaque portion
3 substantially secondary panel the portion of the opening and the transparent portion
4 substantially secondary panel the device.

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1 11. In a vehicle having a passenger compartment, an instrument
2 panel system comprising:
3 an instrument panel having an opening configured to receive at least
4 one display; and
5 a secondary panel configured to substantially cover the opening, the
6 secondary panel comprising a one-way light transmissible material such that at least
7 one display is visible by an occupant in the passenger compartment when the at least
8 one display is active, and the at least one display is concealed from the occupant
9 when the at least one display is inactive.

1 12. The instrument panel system of claim 11 wherein, when the
2 at least one display device is inactive, the surface of the secondary panel visible to
3 the occupant and the surface of the instrument panel visible to the occupant appear
4 substantially similar.

1 13. The instrument panel system of claim 12 wherein the
2 instrument panel and secondary panel are configured to meet so that the instrument
3 panel and secondary panel appear substantially integral to the occupant.

1 14. The instrument panel system of claim 12 wherein the at least
2 one display comprises at least one cathode ray tube display unit.

1 15. The instrument panel system of claim 12 wherein the at least
2 one display comprises at least one light emitting diode device.

1 16. The instrument panel system of claim 12 wherein the at least
2 one display comprises at least one liquid crystal display unit.

1 17. The instrument panel system of claim 12 wherein the at least
2 one display comprises a display unit for conveying information to the occupant.

1 18. The instrument panel system of claim 12 wherein the at least
2 one display comprises a control panel for use by the occupant in controlling at least
3 one vehicle system.

1 19. The instrument panel system of claim 12 wherein the control
2 panel comprises at least one touch activated switch.

3 20. The instrument panel system of claim 11 wherein a portion of
4 the secondary panel comprises the one-way light transmissible material, and a
5 portion of the secondary panel comprises an opaque material, wherein the one-way
6 light transmissible material substantially covers the at least one display and the
7 opaque material substantially covers at least a portion of the opening.